Two-spirit

Two-Spirit (also **two spirit** or, occasionally, **twospirited**) is a modern, pan-Indian, umbrella term used by some indigenous North Americansto describe certain people in their communities who fulfill a traditional third-gender (or other gender-variant) ceremonial role in their cultures.[1][2][3] While most people mistakenly associate the term with "LGBT Native", the term and identity of two-spirit "does not make sense" unless it is contextualized within a Native American or First Nations framework and traditional cultural understanding.[3][4][5] The term was adopted by consensus in 1990 at an Indigenous lesbian and gay international gathering to encourage the replacement of the outdated, and now seen as inappropriate, anthropological term *berdache*.[4][6][7][8]

The two spirit contingent marches atSan Francisco Pride 2014.

"Two Spirit" is not interchangeable with "LGBT Native American" or "Gay Indian";[2] this title differs from most western, mainstream definitions of sexuality and gender identity in that it is not a modern, self-chosen term of personal sexual or gender "identity"; rather, it is a sacred, spiritual and ceremonial role that is recognized and confirmed by the Elders of the Two Spirit's ceremonial community.[1][2] While some have found the term a useful tool for intertribal organizing, not all Native cultures conceptualize gender or sexuality this way, not all tribes have ceremonial roles for these people, and the tribes who do usually use names in their own languages.[6][9] While pan-Indian terms are not always appropriate or welcome, the term has generally received more acceptance and use than the term it replaced.[6]

Third and fourth gender roles traditionally embodied by two-spirit people include performing work and wearing clothing associated with both men and women Not all tribes/nations have rigidgender roles, but, among those that do, the spectrum that has usually been documented is that of four genders: feminine woman, masculine woman, feminine man, masculine man.[1]

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Definition and societal role in indigenous communities

> "The elders will tell you the difference between a gay Indian and a Two-Spirit," [Joey Criddle] said, underscoring the idea that simply being gay and Indian does not make someone a Two-Spirit.[2]

Drawing by George Catlin (1796–1872) while on the Great Plains among the Sac and Fox Nation Depicting a ceremonial dance, non-Native artist George Catlin titled the painting *Dance to the Berdache*

> Unfortunately, depending on an oral tradition to impart our ways to future generations opened the floodgates for early non-Native explorers, missionaries, and anthropologists to write books describing Native peoples and therefore bolstering their own role as experts. These writings were and still are entrenched in the perspective of the authors who were and are mostly white men.[10]

Historically, the presence of male-bodied two-spirits "was a fundamental institution among most tribal peoples", according to Brian Gilley[11] and, according to non-Native anthropologist Will Roscoe, both male- and female-bodied two-spirits have been documented "in over 130 North American tribes, in every region of the continent".[12] However, Ojibwe journalist Mary Annette Pember argues that this depiction threatens to homogenize diverse Indigenous cultures, painting over them with an overly broad brush, potentially causing the disappearance of "distinct cultural and language differences that Native peoples hold crucial to their identity".[13]

According to German anthropologist Sabine Lang, cross dressing of two spirit people was not always an indicator of gender identity. Lang believes "the mere fact that a male wears women's clothing does not say something about his role behavior, his gender status, or even his choice of partner".[14]

Male-bodied two spirit people, regardless of gender identification, can go to war and have access to male activities such as male-only sweat lodge ceremonies.[15] However, they may also take on "feminine" activities such as cooking and other domestic responsibilities.[16] According to Lang, female assigned at birth two-spirits usually have sexual relations or marriages with only females.[17]

Contemporary issues

The increasing visibility of the two spirit concept in mainstream culture has been seen as both empowering and as having some undesirable consequences, such as the spread of misinformation about the cultures of Indigenous people, pan-Indianism, and cultural appropriation of Indigenous identities and ceremonial ways among non-Natives who do not understand that Indigenous communities see two spirit as a specifically Native American and First Nations cultural identity, not one to be taken up by non-Natives.[13][18]

> These sort of simplified black-and-white depictions of Native culture and history perpetuate indiscriminate appropriation of Native peoples. Although the current new meme or legend surrounding the term two spirit is certainly laudable for helping LGBTQ people create their own more empowering terminology to describe themselves, it carries some questionable baggage.
>
> My concern is not so much over the use of the words but over the social meme they have generated that has morphed into a cocktail of historical revisionism, wishful thinking, good intentions, and a soupçon of white, entitled appropriation.[13]

For First Nations two spirits whose lives have been impacted by the Residential Schools, and other Indigenous communities who have experienced severe cultural damage from colonization, the specific two spirit traditions in their communities may have been severely damaged, fragmented, or even lost.[18] In these cases there have been serious challenges to remembering and reviving their older traditional ways, and to overcoming the homophobia and other learned prejudices of forced assimilation.[18]

When Indigenous people from communities that are less-accepting of two spirits have sought community among non-Native LGBT communities, however, the tendency for non-Natives to tokenize and appropriate has at times led to rifts rather than unity, with two spirits feeling like they are just another tacked on initial rather than fully included.[18]

> The term two-spirited was chosen to emphasize our difference in our experiences of multiple, interlocking oppressions as queer Aboriginal people. When non-Aboriginal people decide to "take up" the term two-spirit, it detracts from its original meaning and diffuses its power as a label of resistance for Aboriginal people. Already there is so much of First Nations culture that has been exploited and appropriated in this country; must our terms of resistance also be targeted for mainstream appropriation and consumption?
>
> Two-spirited is a reclaimed term designed by Aboriginals to define our unique cultural context, histories, and legacy. When people do not see the harm in "sharing" the term, they are missing the point and refusing to recognize that by appropriating the term they will inevitably alter its cultural context.[18]

In academia, there has since 2010 or earlier been a move to "queer the analytics of settler colonialism" and create a "twospirit" critique as part of the general field of queer studies.[13][19] However, much of this academic analysis and publishing is not based in traditional indigenous knowledge, but in the more mainstream, non-Native perspectives of the broader LGBT communities, so most of the same cultural misunderstandings tend to be found as in the outdated writing of the non-Native anthropologists and "explorers".[13] Claiming a viewpoint of "postidentity" analysis, supporters of "queer of color critique" aim to examine settler colonialism and the ongoing genocide of Native peoples while "queering Native Studies".[19] However, Indigenous identity is predominantly cultural, rather than a racial classification.[20] It is based on membership in a particular community, cultural fluency, citizenship, and Native American and First Nations people may or may not even consider themselves to be "people of color".[20]

Terminology

With over 500 surviving Native American cultures, attitudes about sex and gender can be diverse. Even with the modern adoption of pan-Indian terms like two-spirit, and the creation of a modern pan-Indian community around this naming, not all cultures will perceive two-spirits the same way, or welcome a pan-Indian term to replace the terms already in use by their cultures.[13] Additionally, not all contemporary Indigenous communities are supportive of their gender-variant and non-heterosexual people now. In these communities, those looking for two-spirit community have sometimes faced oppression and rejection.[5][13] While existing terminology in many nations shows historical acknowledgement of differing sexual orientations and gender expressions, members of some these nations have also said that while variance was accepted, they never had separate or defined roles for these members of the community.[5][13] Among the Indigenous communities that traditionally have roles for two-spirit people, specific terms in their own languages are used for the social and spiritual roles these individuals fulfill.[13][21]

- Cree: napêw iskwêwisêhot, "A man who dresses as a woman".[5]
- Cree: iskwêw ka napêwayat, "A woman who dresses as a man".[5]
- Cree: ayahkwêw, "A man dressed/living/accepted as a woman"; possibly not a respectful term; others have suggested it is a third gender designation, applied to both women *and* men.[5]
- Cree: înahpîkasoht, "A woman dressed/living/accepted as a man"; also given as "someone who fights everyone to prove they are the toughest".[5]
- Cree: iskwêhkân, "One who acts/lives as a woman".[5]
- Cree: napêhkân, "One who acts/lives as a man".[5]
- Lakota: *wíŋkte* is the contraction of an older Lakota word, *Winyanktehca*, meaning "wants to be like a woman".[22] *Winkte* are a social category in historical Lakota culture, of male-bodied people who adopt the clothing, work, and mannerisms that Lakota culture usually considers feminine. In contemporary Lakota culture, the term is more commonly associated with simply being gay. Both historically and in modern culture, usually *winkte* are homosexual, though they may or may not consider themselves part of the more mainstream LGBT communities. Some *winkte* participate in the pan-Indian Two Spirit community.[22] While historical accounts of their status vary widely, most accounts see the *winkte* as regular members of the community and not in any way marginalized for their status. Other accounts hold the *winkte* as sacred, occupying a liminal, third gender role in the culture and born to fulfill ceremonial roles that can not be filled by either men or women.[22] In contemporary Lakota communities, attitudes towards the *winkte* vary from accepting to homophobic.[22][23]

- Navajo: *nádleeh* (also given as *nádleehi*), "One who is transformed" or "one who changes".[24][25][26] In traditional Navajo culture, *nádleeh* are male-bodied individuals described by those in their communities as "feminate male", or as "half woman, half man".[1] A 2009 documentary about the tragic murder of *nádleeh* Fred Martinez, entitled, *Two Spirits*, contributed to awareness of these terms and cultures.[1]
- Ojibwe: *ikwekaazo*, "Men who chose to function as women" / "one who endeavors to be like a woman".[27]
- Ojibwe: *ininiikaazo*, "Women who functioned as men" / "one who endeavors to be like a man".[27]

> [In Ojibwe cultures] Sex usually determined one's gender, and therefore one's work, but the Ojibwe accepted variation. Men who chose to function as women were called *ikwekaazo*, meaning 'one who endeavors to be like a woman'. Women who functioned as men were called *ininiikaazo*, meaning, 'one who endeavors to be like a man'. The French called these people *berdaches*. *Ikwekaazo* and *ininiikaazo* could take spouses of their own sex. Their mates were not considered *ikwekaazo* or *ininiikaazo*, however, because their function in society was still in keeping with their sex. If widowed, the spouse of an *ikwekaazo* or *ininiikaazo* could remarry someone of the opposite sex or another *ikwekaazo* or *ininiikaazo*. The *ikwekaazowag* worked and dressed like women. The *ininiikaazowag* worked and dressed like men. Both were considered to be strong spiritually, and they were always honoured, especially during ceremonies.[27]

Before the late twentieth-century, non-Native (i.e. non-Native American/Canadian) anthropologists used the generic term *berdache* /bərˈdæʃ/ to identify an indigenous individual fulfilling one of many mixed gender roles in their tribe, but that term has now fallen ou of favor. Anthropologists primarily used it to identify feminine Native men. Its etymology, however, has meant that it is now considered outdated and potentially offensive: it derives from the French *bardache* (English equivalent: "bardash") meaning "passive homosexual", "catamite"[28] or even "male prostitute". *Bardache*, in turn, derived from the Persian بردہ *barda* meaning "captive", "prisoner of war", "slave".[29][30][31][32] Spanish explorers who encountered two spirits among the Chumash people called them *"joyas"*, the Spanish for "jewels".[33]

Use of the anthropological term *berdache* has now been replaced by the self-chosen "two spirit", which, in 1990, gained widespread popularity during the third annual intertribal Native American/First Nations gay and lesbian conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba.[34] The decision to adopt this new, pan-Indian term was deliberate, with a clear intention to distance themselves from non-Native gays and lesbians,[35] as well as from non-Native terminology like *berdache*, "gay", "lesbian", and "trans".[7][35][36] Cameron writes, "The term two-spirit is thus an Aboriginal-specific term of resistance to colonization and non-transferable to other cultures. There are several underlying reasons for two spirited Aboriginals' desire to distance themselves from the mainstream queer community."[18] Lang explains that for Aboriginal people, their sexual orientation or gender identity is secondary to their ethnic identity. She states, "at the core of contemporary two-spirit identities is ethnicity, an awareness of being Native American as opposed to being white or being a member of any other ethnic group".[35]

Two-spirit societies

Among the goals of two spirit societies are group support; outreach, education, and activism; revival of their Indigenous cultural traditions, including preserving the old languages, skills and dances;[4] and otherwise working toward social change.[37]

Some two-spirit societies (past and present) include: 2Spirits of Toronto in Toronto, Ontario; the Wabanaki Two Spirit Alliance in Nova Scotia; the Bay Area American Indian Two-Spirits (est. 1998) in San Francisco, California;[38] Central Oklahoma Two Spirit Natives in Oklahoma City; the East Coast Two Spirit Society and the NorthEast Two-Spirit Society in New York City; Idaho Two-Spirit Society; the Indiana Two-Spirit Society in Bloomington; Minnesota Two Spirits; the Montana Two-Spirit Society in Browning; the Northwest Two-Spirit Society in Seattle, Washington; the Ohio Valley Two Spirit Society of Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and Southern Illinois;[39][40] the Portland Two Spirit Society (est. May 2012) in Portland, Oregon;[41] the Regina Two-Spirited Society in Regina, Saskatchewan; the Texas Two Spirit Society in Dallas; the Tulsa Two-Spirit Society in Tulsa, Oklahoma; the Two-Spirit Society of Denver in Denver, Colorado; and the Wichita Two-Spirit Society in Wichita, Kansas.[37][42][43][44]

Historical and anthropological accounts

Don Pedro Fages was third in command of the 1769–70 Spanish Portolá expedition, the first European land exploration of what is now the U.S. state of California. At least three diaries were kept during the expedition, but Fages wrote his account later, in 1775. Fages gave more descriptive details about the native Californians than any of the others, and he alone reported the presence of homosexuality in the native culture. The English translation reads:

> I have submitted substantial evidence that those Indian men who, both here and farther inland, are observed in the dress, clothing and character of women – there being two or three such in each village – pass as sodomites by profession. ... They are called *joyas*, and are held in great esteem.[45]

Although two spirits have been both respected and feared in a number of tribes, the two spirit is not beyond being reproached or, by traditional law, even killed for bad deeds. In the Mojave tribe, for instance, two spirit frequently become medicine persons and, like all who deal with the supernatural, are at risk of suspicion of witchcraft, notably in cases of failed harvest or of death. There have been instances of murder in these cases (such as in the case of the female-bodied two spirit named Sahaykwisā).[46] Another instance in the late 1840s was of a Crow male-bodied two spirit who was caught, possibly raiding horses, by the Lakota and was killed.[47]

Lang and Jacobs write that historically among the Apache, the Lipan, Chiricahua, Mescalero, and southern Dilzhe'e have alternative gender identities.[48][49] One tribe in particular, the Eyak, has a single report from 1938 that they did not have an alternative gender and they held such individuals in low esteem, although whether this sentiment is the result of acculturation or not is unknown.[50]

Among the Iroquois, there is a single report from Bacqueville de la Potherie in his book published in 1722, *Histoire de l'Amérique septentrionale*, that indicates that an alternative gender identity exists among them.[51]

Many, if not all, tribes have been influenced by European homophobia and misogyny.[52][53][54][55][56] Some sources have reported that the Aztecs and Incas had laws against such individuals,[57][58] though there are some authors who feel that this was exaggerated or the result of acculturation, because all of the documents indicating this are post-conquest and any that existed before had been destroyed by the Spanish.[55][59] The belief that these laws existed, at least for the Aztecs, comes from the Florentine Codex, and that evidence exists that indigenous peoples authored many codices, but the Spaniards destroyed most of them in their attempt to eradicat ancient beliefs.[60] Nowadays, some Zapotec natives from Mexico are born as males, but later cross dress as women and practice all activities associated to the female gender. Such people are known as muxe.[61]

Media representation

The 2009 documentary film[62] *Two Spirits*, directed by Lydia Nibley, tells the story of the hate-murder of 16-year-old Navajo Fred Martinez. In the film, Nibley "affirms Martinez' Navajo sense of being a two spirit 'effeminate male', or *nádleeh*".[1]:168 Martinez' mother defined *nádleeh* as "half woman, half man".[1]:169

The two spirit pride trolley at San Francisco Pride 2014.

The film *Two Spirits*, shown on Independent Lens in 2011, and winner of the annual Audience Award for that year, is about two-spirit people, particularly Fred Martinez, who was murdered at age 16 for identifying as a two-spirit.[63][64]

In 2017 two-spirited Metis filmmaker Marjorie Beaucage released a *Coming In Stories: Two Spirit in Saskatchewan* as way to raise awareness about the experiences of two-spirited individuals living in Saskatchewan, Canada.[65][66]

In the 2018 indie film, The Miseducation of Cameron Post, a Lakota character – Adam, played by Forrest Goodluck – is sent to a conversion camp for identifying as *winkte* and two-spirit.[67]

In the 2019, second season of *American Gods*, Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs (Mohawk) plays a young Cherokee woman, Sam Black Crow, who self-identifies as "two-spirited". Her character, raised by a white mother and estranged from her Native father, speaks of looking to older ancestors to try to find her own beliefs, much like the other humans in the series. In an interview she says, "I identify

as queer, and not two-spirited, because I'm Mohawk and we don't have that" and that Neil Gaiman (author of the novels on which the series is based) advocated strongly for her to be cast in the role.[68]

Tributes

In 2012, a marker dedicated to two spirit people was included in the Legacy Walk, an outdoor public display in Chicago, Illinois, that celebrates LGBT history and people.[69]

Self-identified two spirits

A traditional two spirit must be recognized as such by the Elders of their Indigenous community.[1][2] Inclusion in this list is not an indication of whether or not that is the case.

- Susan Allen (Lakota), Minnesota State Representative[70]
- Alec Butler (Métis), Canadian playwright and filmmaker[71]
- Chrystos (Menominee), writer and activist[72]
- Raven Davis (Ojibwe), artist, activist, and traditional cultural worker[73]
- Richard LaFortune (Yupik), activist, author and artist[74]
- Kent Monkman (Cree), visual and performing artist[75]
- Rebecca Nagle (Cherokee), activist and writer[76]
- Harlan Pruden (Cree), scholar and activist[77]
- Massey Whiteknife (Cree), businessman, producer and entertainer[78]

See also

- Gender roles among the indigenous peoples of North America
- Koekchuch
- Māhū, those "in the middle", between the polar genders, in some Pacific Islander indigenous communities
- Mapuche
- Muxe, third-gender individuals from Mexican indigenous cultures
- Native American identity in the United States
- Third gender
- Osh-Tisch

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Archival resources

- Bruce McKinney Papers, 1908–2000 in the Kenneth Spencer Research Library (University of Kansas Libraries).
- Claude E. Schaeffer fonds at the Glenbow Museum.
- Robert Lynch Papers, 1963–1989 at the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections of Cornell University Library
- Two-Spirited Collection at the University of Winnipeg Archives

External links

- *Language, culture, and Two-Spirit identity* – âpihtawikosisân – Cree and other Indigenous perspectives
- Native American 'Two-Spirit People' Serve Unique Roles Within Their Communities – One 'Winkte' Talks About Role Of LGBT People In Lakota Culture
- *Two Spirit Journal*
- *San Francisco Two-Spirit Powwow* – 2017 video by award-winning photographer Matika Wilbur
- *Two Spirits* – 2009 documentary about *nádleehí* Fred Martinez, tragically murdered at age 16
- *Two-Spirits: Belonging* – 2005 short film by Rope Wolf

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